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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns microcounseling approaches which involve teaching the component behaviors of effective counseling or interviewing within a problem-solving framework. It notes that Egan, Ivey and Carkhuff, as proponents of this view, stress that later action stages of the problem-solving cycle should be based on an adequate understanding of the client's problem. This paper examines the relationship between the skills which comprise the microcounseling approach and the goal of problem understanding. It is argued that the microcounseling approach: (1) lacks any explanation of how problem understanding is reached; (2) concentrates instead on the communication techniques involved in the discovery and modification of the client's understanding; and (3) that this omission leaves counselors without a rationale for the modification of their clients' views and without a means to regulate their use of the various microskills. Information theory and recent research on complex problem-solving are introduced to explain the skills involved in reaching a high quality understanding of a client's problem. Given that these complex cognitive processes are not addressed in the microcounseling approach, suggestions for its modification are provided. (Author/ABL)

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A Critique of the Microcounselling Approach to Problem Understanding

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Running Head: MICROCOUNSELLING CRITIQUE.

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Abstract

Microcounselling approaches involve teaching the component behaviours of effective counselling or interviewing within a problem-solving framework. Egan, Ivey and Carkhuff, as proponents of this view, stress that later action stages of the problem-solving cycle should be based on an adequate understanding of the client's problem. This paper examines the relationship between the skills which comprise the micro-counselling approach and the goal of problem understanding. We argue that the approach lacks any explanation of how problem understanding is reached, and that it concentrates instead on the communication techniques involved in the discovery and modification of the client's understanding. This omission leaves counsellors without a rationale for the modification of their clients' views and without a means to regulate their use of the various microskills. The authors introduce information theory and recent research on complex problem-solving to explain the skills involved in reaching a high quality understanding of a client's problem. Given that these complex cognitive processes are not addressed in the microcounselling approach, we conclude with suggestions for its modification.

A Critique of the Microcounselling Approach
to Problem Understanding.

Counsellor training is now dominated by an approach which involves teaching the component behaviours of effective counselling and interviewing. Hatcher and Brooks (1977) report that of over 500 counsellor education programmes surveyed, 76% of those responding reported a commitment to competency-based behavioural training. The writings of Ivey, Egan, and Carkhuff, the major proponents of this approach, are among the ten most frequently cited books in the three major counselling psychology journals (Heesacker, Heppner & Rogers, 1982). Ivey's micro-skills hierarchy delineates the succesive steps involved in intentional interviewing and counselling (Ivey, 1983; Ivey & Authier, 1978). Egan's book 'The Skilled Helper' defines, exemplifies, and gives opportunity to practice the discrete skills involved in effective helping (1982). In the 'Art of Helping IV', Carkhuff (1980) presents a "simple step-by-step presentation of concrete skills" (p.1) that are based on his earlier more theoretical works (1969, Vols 1 & 2).

As well as sharing a concept of counselling as a set of separate skills, these authors also agree that the skills should be embedded in a problem-solving or problem-management view of the counselling process. While the language they use may vary, these authors see the counsellor's role as using the skills to help the client move through some version of the problem-understanding, goal-setting, and action stages of the problem-solving cycle (e.g. Egan, 1982, p.33; Ivey, 1983, Chap.10).

These authors stress the importance of basing the latter stages of the problem-solving cycle (design, implementation and evaluation of action steps) on an adequate identification and analysis of the client's problem. Carkhuff (1969b, p.31) talks of problem understanding providing "directionality" for the interview, while Egan writes "unless the problem situation is clear, not just to the helper but especially to the client, the latter can not make reasonable decisions about what to do about it" (p.35). Problem understanding (a term which we will use as equivalent to the analysis, clarification, identification or definition of a problem), is given this kind of importance in all the problem-solving literature (Dewey, 1933; Heppner, 1978).

The goal of this paper is to examine the relationship between the skills described in the microcounselling literature and the task of understanding the client's problem. This task involves discovering the client's view of the problem, evaluating it, and where necessary modifying it so that appropriate action can be taken. We argue that a necessary condition of the discovery, evaluation and modification of the client's view, is the development of the counsellor's own understanding of the client's problem, and show that the microcounselling approach lacks an explanation of what is involved in this task. Our arguments will be conceptual and empirical with the latter based on recent research on the analysis of complex problems, including those presented by clients. Finally, we suggest ways in which counsellor training could be more effective in helping counsellors

to reach a high quality analysis of their clients' problems.

The Microcounselling Approach

Table 1 shows how the major proponents of the microcounselling approach describe the stages and skills which are relevant to the development of problem understanding. All three authors agree that the first step in this process involves discovering how the client views the problem, including both relevant life

Table 1 about here

events and the client's beliefs about and emotional reactions to the problem situation. Descriptions of the subsequent stages vary slightly across the three authors. Both Egan (1982) and Carkhuff (1969b) describe how the client's view is frequently inadequate and must be modified or extended by the counsellor. Egan describes the process as:

> In Stage I [Problem Exploration and Clarification], the counsellor helps the client explore problem situations from the client's point of view. However, very often the client's point of view or perspective is not enough. These perspectives are too self-limiting or self-defeating. Clients need to move beyond their own frames of reference to new perspectives on themselves and the problem situation (p.150)....
>
> In Stage II, [Developing New Perspectives and Setting Goals] however, there is a shift. The counsellor now helps the client see the world from a more objective (sic) point of view. (p.157)

Carkhuff (1969b) is also clear about the need for the counsellor to first understand the client's world and then "to extend the limits of his (sic) own understanding, particularly in the areas of functioning in which the helpee does not demonstrate a depth of understanding" (p.84).

Ivey is less explicit about the need to modify the client's problem understanding. For Ivey, the task of problem definition involves discovering the client's view of the problem, and using supplementary questions to ensure that "the most important aspects are covered":

> The central task at this point [Gathering Information, Defining the Problem and Identifying Assets] is defining the problem as the client feels it. This can be supplemented by gathering information and data about the client and the client's perceptions. The basic who, what, where, when, how and why series of questions provide one short and often useful frame to make sure you have covered the most important aspects of information gathering and problem definition." (Ivey, 1983, p.228).

Ivey does not acknowledge that the data produced by these supplementary questions may lead the counsellor to hold a view which conflicts with that of the client. Presumably, he intends any such differences to be resolved, however, for he writes that the "desired direction of the client and the counsellor should be reasonably harmonious" and indicates that various influencing skills could be used to produce a shift in the client's thinking.

Table 1 shows that there is considerable agreement about the skills involved in the two stages of problem understanding. In the first stage, skills of attending, listening, and reflection are used to gain an accurate picture of how the client experiences the world.

In the second stage, the terminology of the three authors varies somewhat, with Carkhuff describing the skill of personalizing as involving going beyond the material which the helpee presents. This involves identifying the implications of the situation for the helpee, suggesting how the helpee's behaviour contributes to the problem, and establishing helpee goals (Carkhuff, 1980, p.123-143). Egan and Ivey add challenging and influencing skills respectively, to the repertoire needed for effective completion of the stage of developing new perspectives and setting goals.

Neglect of Problem Understanding

A counsellor who attempts to modify or extend a client's problem understanding must have first judged that the client's view was in some way inadequate. By inference the standard which is applied is the counsellor's own understanding of the client's problem. How has this understanding been reached, and what guarantee is there, that the counsellor's view is any more accurate and complete than that of the client? Although the counsellor's understanding is used to judge and if necessary to modify the client's understanding, surprisingly little attention is devoted in the microcounselling approach to the processes by which a counsellor reaches such an under-

standing. Of the three authors, Carkhuff comes closest to attempting a description of some of the processes involved. He argues:

> The most difficult aspect of the helping process involves going beyond the helpee.... When we go beyond the helpee and understand the meaning of the situation and the helpee's personal deficits we say that we are personalizing .... When we personalize, the helpee will come to experience herself more accurately in the area of her concern. We do this by drawing increasinly upon our own experience. (Carkhuff, 1980, p.123)

Since everything we do draws upon our experience, this statement is true in a trivial sense, but also unhelpful in that there is no guarantee that the counsellor's experience will be an adequate basis for understanding the client's problem. More helpful, is Carkhuff's elaboration of the various steps involved in personalizing. These steps involve reasoning about the implications of the problem for the client's life and about how the client's behaviour contributes to the problem (causal reasoning); processes which are relevant to understanding the client's problem. Experience of the client's problem however is no guarantee that the counsellor can reason adequately about the problem. We provide evidence in a later section that counsellors have difficulty with these cognitive processes and that they need to be given far more attention than they receive in Carkhuff's training manual.

Egan and Ivey give considerable space to how the counsellor communicates his or her understanding to the client, but even

less attention than Carkhuff to its origins and content. It is almost as though the counsellor's understanding develops automatically, either concurrently with or subsequent to the discovery of the client's understanding. Of course, the counsellor will be developing some understanding as the data are obtained, but it is not inevitable as this literature seems to assume, that this understanding will be any more complete or action-oriented than that of the client.

It might be argued that although the microcounselling approach does not have an adequate description of how counsellors can develop their own understanding of their clients' problems, it still provides a useful description of the communication skills involved in discovering and modifying the client's view of the problem. This argument can not be sustained however, for microskill writers themselves repeatedly advise counsellors to use their own understanding of the client's problem to regulate their use of the various communication skills. Egan (1982) for example, in discussing how to help clients define their problems more clearly cautions, "Some helpers use questions to amass information, much of which proves to be irrelevant. The purpose of exploration is to help the client see the problem more clearly" (p.101). Similarly, in discussing exploration of themes he writes, "Of course pursuing such a theme when it is not relevant to the client's problem situation makes little sense" (p.107). Avoiding irrelevant data or themes requires the counsellor to have some understanding of what is and is not relevant. Helping the client see the problem "more clearly",

requires the counsellor to have a clearer view of the problem than the client does. Even at this early data gathering stage, use of the communication skills is guided by the counsellor's understanding of the problem. The importance of this understanding in guiding the use of the microskills becomes even more obvious in the second stage of the process. Egan (1982) writes; "Advanced empathy is a way of sharing useful 'hunches' with your client." There is no discussion of how a counsellor should discriminate more or less useful hunches. Given that most client problems are rich enough to provide some support for all but the most outrageous hypotheses (Arkes, 1981), some discussion of how useful hunches are arrived at is called for.

We can conclude therefore that the microcounselling approach needs an explanation of how problem understanding is achieved for two reasons. First, the counsellor's problem understanding provides the content basis for the evaluation and possible modification of the client's view of his or her problem. Second, the counsellor's understanding regulates the use of the various communication skills identified in the microcounselling approach.

Defenders of the microcounselling approach might argue that the omission of an explanation of problem understanding is not serious because counsellors who attend and listen carefully will automatically reach an understanding of the client data they collect. The real issue however, is not whether an understanding is reached, but whether it is of a high quality. Our recent research on the skills of problem analysis showed that many experienced counsellors do not reach a high quality

analysis of their client's problem (Halliday & Robinson, 1985). Some who produced low quality analyses collected client data in a thorough but apparently purposeless way, so that they had difficulty detecting underlying themes and their interrelationships. Others tended to overinterpret some client data and ignore other data that two independent judges considered to be highly relevant. As a result, they produced plausible but inaccurate and incomplete analyses of the client's problem. Other writers have described how physicians (Elstein, Shulman & Sprafka, 1978) and clinicians (Arkes, 1981) make similar types of errors in diagnosing client problems.

Understanding Complex Problems

Given that a high quality understanding is essential to the counsellor's ability to help the client, we must be clear about the characteristics of such an understanding and the skills needed to achieve it. Glaser has argued that a high quality understanding is accurate (true to the facts of the case), complete, and coherent (1984, p.98). Coherence involves abstraction from the details of the problem or case in a way which identifies the critical features of the problem and their interrelationships. This definition has provided the conceptual basis for a rating scale used to evaluate the quality of counsellors' written analysis of their clients' problems. Research results suggest that the construct 'high quality understanding' can be reliably measured (Halliday & Robinson, 1985).

A first step towards discovering the skills involved in developing a high quality understanding is to examine the task faced by the counsellor who is trying to understand a client's problem. The counsellor must choose from hundreds of possible questions, to pursue those leads which are most likely to be relevant. Talk of relevance however, presupposes that the counsellor understands the nature of the problem, whereas this is precisely what is to be discovered. The counsellor's goal is to understand the client's problem, but it will not be clear during the course of the interview whether or not this goal has been satisfactorily achieved. There may be several acceptable interpretations of the client's data and the final test of their quality comes only with the implementation and evaluation of the action steps. Moreover, given that the problem is likely to involve complex and unique relationships between a large number of variables, there will be no clearly defined procedures for achieving a high quality understanding. Problems with these characteristics are called ill-structured, in contrast to well-structured problems like those in mathematics or logic (Simon, 1972).

Faced with such an ill-structured problem, the counsellor's task is to reduce its complexity by developing a model of it, which is accurate, yet which imposes order and points the way to future action. As Donald Schön argues "there is a problem in finding the problem" so that the skill needed is as much in problem setting as it is in problem solving (1983, p.129).

Information processing and a small empirical literature on expert and inexpert problem-solvers suggest two related sets of skills needed to attain a high quality understanding of this type of problem. Counsellors faced with understanding complex problems run the risk of cognitive overload, since there are severe limitations on the amount of information humans can work with at any one time. To get around this difficulty, information processing theory suggests that it is necessary to restrict the search for information and to process data as they are collected, rather than treating data collection and data interpretation as separate activities. Information processing theory suggests that to collect and interpret data concurrently counsellors need to develop and test hypotheses about the client's problem. These hypotheses might range from very general (e.g. "There seems to be some difficulty within the client's family") to very specific (e.g. "It looks as though the client's rejection of her mother's intellectual values has resulted in her restricted job search."). Each hypothesis guides a series of questions designed to test whether or not the hypothesis applies in this particular case. This process resolves the issue of relevance, because hypotheses indicate both what information to obtain and how to evaluate it.

Skill in testing a series of hypotheses about the client's problem will therefore be important for achieving a high quality understanding. There is some evidence that counsellors do not necessarily have this skill. Hirsch and Stone (1983) found that counsellors had considerable difficulty in translating their initial conceptualization of the client's problem into a series

of relevant questions. Lack of skill in this area was also suggested by the authors' research in which the relationship between use of hypotheses and problem analysis quality was tested in a study of the initial interviews of 30 experienced counsellors (Halliday & Robinson, 1985). Use of hypotheses was measured by coding the three main interview topics according to whether they showed that the counsellor was seeking to understand, rather than to collect data about or remediate, the client's problem. On average, only slightly over one of the three main topics had this diagnostic quality. Counsellors who had more topics of this type produced significantly higher quality analyses of the client's problem.

A related skill, that of reasoning or interpretation, is also needed. While hypothesis testing involves causal or diagnostic reasoning (in the sense of both proximal and distal causes), other types of reasoning are also relevant to the analysis of complex problems. Chi, Feltovich and Glaser (1981), and Glaser (1984) describe how expert problem solvers use their knowledge of theory and underlying principles to integrate apparently disparate features of a problem, to infer further information from that which is given, to make predictions and to recognize critical elements in the data. While experts use their knowledge to reason about the data, novices remain tied to its surface features, unable to generate further information from that which is initially available. In the counselling literature, Claiborn (1982) has identified the differing impact on clients of counsellors who are tied to the client data and

of those who transform the client's data by disclosing their theoretically based interpretation of it. Our research (Halliday & Robinson, 1985) has also shown that although interviewer overt reasoning is a low frequency behaviour it is highly predictive of problem analysis quality.

In short, the skills involved in reaching a high quality understanding indicate that the process is cognitively demanding. Counsellors must generate hypotheses and possible interpretations, frame questions which test their applicability and constantly evaluate the implications of their interpretations for the coherence of their understanding of the whole.

Microcounselling as a Skills Approach

Early in his text Egan (1982) cautions that the practice of techniques without consideration of the goal of problem understanding results in techniques being treated as ends in themselves. Despite such warnings, we would argue that this is exactly how techniques are treated in the microcounselling approach. Given that the relationship between the techniques and the goal of problem understanding is either ignored or assumed, one could reasonably question whether the author's claim to be teaching counselling skills is a valid one. Bruner explains the concept of "skill" as:

> In broad outline, skilled action requires recognizing the features of a task, its goal, and means appropriate for its attainment; a means of converting this information into appropriate action and a means of getting feedback that compares the objective sought with the present state attained.... (1970, p.112)

Translated into the counselling situation, this means that to be skilful in reaching problem understanding, the counsellor must intend to understand the client's problem, must take appropriate steps towards the goal, and must constantly monitor the process. This will entail simultaneously obtaining and interpreting client data, reducing the complexity of the task by developing a coherent representation of the problem, and actively constructing meanings rather than waiting passively for them to emerge. It also implies that the skilful counsellor makes constant comparisons between new client information and what he or she already knows, as a way of monitoring progress towards the goal of an accurate, complete and coherent understanding of the client's problem.

In other words, skilled performance involves the sequencing of behaviours to achieve a predetermined objective with flexible adjustments being made according to feedback received both from the client and from the counsellor's own judgements about how the task is being achieved. If the counsellor's objective is problem understanding, then the sequencing of various communication techniques will be determined by the counsellor's current understanding. For example, at the beginning of an interview a counsellor's understanding of the client's problem is minimal, so techniques of open-ended questioning and rapport building are important to obtain information in an unbiased and flexible manner. While the client is telling his or her story, the counsellor may be using skills of sorting and theme identification, along with paraphrasing and reflection, to both maintain rapport with

the client and to process the details into more manageable larger chunks. When a hypothesis is developed, the counsellor may use more directive questioning techniques, such as discriminative probes or confrontation, to obtain data that will test the accuracy of the hypothesis. If the hypothesis is confirmed, then various influencing and interpretive techniques are used to share and check the interpretation with the client. If the hypothesis is disconfirmed, the counsellor may cycle back to the more non-directive questioning techniques. The counsellor can not apply the techniques in a fixed sequence, but must make a series of choices about which to use, guided by his or her current understanding of the client's problem. The counsellor's problem understanding is both the goal of the counselling activity and the means for its regulation.

Microcounselling texts teach techniques rather than skills because students are taught to perform various behaviours, and not how to use them to achieve the goal of the counselling activity. For example, in their sections on challenging and influencing skills, Egan and Ivey respectively describe the various skills, provide brief examples of each, and then invite the reader to generate one or more interpretations of fragments of client speech. The task presented in these texts requires decisions about which fragment to respond to, and decisions about the content of the response. Indeed, counsellors do not or probably should not respond to client fragments at all, but should respond to their current understanding of the client's

story within which any particular fragment gains meaning.

By presenting the task in this way, the authors ignore the fact that one of the features of skilled performance is its co-ordination over time (Neisser, 1983). The counsellor's earlier hypotheses and interpretations provide constraints on any subsequent interpretations, so that the latter must either be consistent with the former, or if they are not the counsellor must recognize and deal with the inconsistency. When counsellors are required to respond out of context, they do not have to consider these constraints and many more interpretations of the fragment are acceptable than would be the case in the real counselling situation. By ignoring the thinking processes which transform techniques into skills, the complex task of deriving meaning from a client's story has been largely reduced to a problem of <u>how</u> to communicate, rather than of how to understand the client's problem so that one can know <u>what</u> to communicate.

Conclusions and Implications for Counsellor Training

We have argued in this paper, that an important goal of initial counselling interviews is to reach a high quality understanding of the client's problem, and that this requires considerable cognitive as well as communication skills on the part of the counsellor. Present microcounselling training approaches lack an explanation of the cognitive processes involved, and consequently overemphasize the communication aspect of the counselling session.

Two sets of cognitive processes need to be given far more emphasis. First, the skills involved in deriving meaning from the client's story need to be described, practiced and evaluated. These include the development of hypotheses relevant to client data and the ability to process more and more data as the interview progresses, by integrating details, drawing inferences, seeing patterns and setting aside irrelevant material. Second, the skills involved in testing and checking the meanings derived, are critical to the attainment of an accurate understanding of the client's problem. These include the ability to formulate questions which serve as critical tests of hypotheses, the ability to use client responses to evaluate the accuracy of hypotheses, and the ability to involve the client as a partner in the checking process by disclosing one's reasoning in a facilitative manner (Argyris, 1982).

For counsellor trainers these suggestions imply that they should spend at least as much time focusing on the way their students are reasoning about the client's problem as they do on the way they are communicating. This can be done during practice sessions by asking students to explain their current understanding of the client's problem to the trainer, and after the session, by evaluating the quality of the student's written or oral understanding of the client's problem. Trainers should also consider whether their use of checklists of communication behaviours as evaluation tools, promotes skilled performance as we have described it, or whether it reinforces in the minds of counsellor trainees the view that the goal of their performance is the demonstration of a requisite number of techniques.

Major revisions to counsellor training materials are also suggested by our analysis. Authors should show in their texts how the counsellor's understanding of the client's problem at particular stages of the interview, guides both the content of their communication and their choice of a particular technique. This means that texts would present lengthy sections of interviews, with the accompanying analysis showing the connections between the counsellor's reasoning and behaviour. If microcounselling texts and training programmes made these sorts of revisions, then they could rightly claim to be teaching counsellors to be skilled helpers.

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Table 1

Descriptions of Counselling Stages and Skills Associated with Problem Understanding

Carkhuff[a]			Egan[b]			Ivey[c]		
Stages	Functions	Skills	Stages	Functions	Skills	Stages	Functions	Skills
Exploration: The Downward or Onward Phase	. helpee's self-exploration of areas of concern . helper understands the world as the helpee does	. attending including observing and listening . responding to content and feeling	Problem Exploration and Clarification	. understand problem from client's point of view	. attending . active listening . probing . accurate empathy	Gathering Information, Defining the Problem and Identifying Assets	. discover how client views problem . supplement this view with who, what, why questions.	. basic listening sequence e.g. open and closed questions, encourage, paraphrase, summarize reflection of feeling. . reflection of meaning
Understanding and Action: The Upward or Outward Phase	. establish a constructive direction or problem resolution for helpee.	. personalizing meaning, problem, feeling and goal	Developing New Perspectives and Setting Goals	. help client develop new, possibly more objective views . help client set goals based on this new understanding	. integrating data . challenging skills e.g. information sharing, advanced accurate empathy, confrontation, immediacy . goal-setting skills	Determining Outcomes	. discover what clients want . direction of client and counsellor should be reasonably harmonious	. attending skills . basic listening sequence . influencing skills, e.g., directives feedback, advice, logical consequences, explanations.

a. Carkhuff summary is based on Carkhuff (1969b) for description of stages and functions, and Carkhuff (1980) for description of skills.

b. Egan summary is based on Egan (1982).

c. Ivey summary is based on Ivey (1983), especially pp. 226-237.